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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to further explore the relationship between sex role identity and social competence in a developmental context. Two specific questions were of concern: Do levels of masculinity, femininity and social competence vary by age, and does the relationship of masculinity and femininity remain constant and positive in non-college aged adults? Triads of women were drawn from three adult generations within the same families (N=36). The age range of the youngest generation was 18-27 (M=22), the parent generation age range was 39-56 (M=48), and the oldest generation age range was 58-94 (M=73). Both the Bem Sex Role Inventory and the Texas Social Behavior Inventory were administered to all subjects. The results of this study lend limited support to the notion that masculinity in women increases with age at least into middle age. They also provide further corroboration of studies which have found that high masculinity scores in women are associated with high social competence. The data in regard to femininity suggest that the relationship of femininity to social competence varies with the age and shifting roles of adult women. (Author/JEL)

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The Relationship Between Masculinity, Femininity and Social Competence in Three Generations of Women

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Recent research focused on the concept of androgyny has lent support to the notion that stereotypical sex role differentiation may not be functional to the development of full human potential. In fact one of the characteristics of psychologically healthy individuals in today's society may be the ability to draw upon a variety of characteristics or behaviors stereotypically identified as masculine and feminine as the demands of the situation warrant. Studies reported by Bem (1975) and Spence, Helmreich, and Stapp (1975) suggest that males and females with high scores on both masculinity and femininity display greater behavioral adaptability and social competence. Analysis of the Bem (1977) data by use of multiple regression indicated that independence was positively related to masculinity for both sexes and negatively related to femininity. Surprisingly, nurturance in women was positively correlated with masculinity. Both Bem (1977) and Spence, et al (1975) report that women with both higher masculine and higher feminine characteristics score higher on the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich, Stapp, & Ervin, 1974), a measure of social competence and self-esteem.

The present study was designed to further explore the relationship between sex role identity and social competence in a developmental context. Two specific questions were of concern: Do levels of masculinity, femininity and social competence vary by age; and, does the relationship of masculinity and femininity to social competence, previously described, remain constant in non-college aged adults? A study by Mussen (1962) lends support to the hypothesis that the relationship of masculinity and femininity and adjustment may vary with age. In the Mussen (1962) study low masculinity was associated with poor adjustment in 17 and 18 year old males. Twenty years later males who had scored high on masculinity

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as young men showed less capacity for status, less self-acceptance, and were less likely to be leaders than males whose initial masculinity scores were lower.

The present pilot study utilized a sample drawn from three generations of adult women to explore some of these possible age-related differences in levels of masculinity, femininity, and social competency scores. It was our expectation that significant differences would emerge between generations on these measures. It was also hypothesized that masculinity would be positively related to social competence in all generations although the magnitude of that relationship might vary among generations. Similarly we expected a positive correlation between femininity scores and social competence, although we expected the size of the correlation to be smaller. Finally we hypothesized that the relationship between femininity and social competence might also be differential in the three generations of adult women.

Method

Subjects

Twelve triads of women drawn from three adult generations within the same families participated in this study. Subjects were recruited from the families and friends of students attending evening psychology courses at University College of Syracuse University. The age range of the youngest generation was 18-27 years (M = 22), the parent generation age range was 39-56 (M = 48), and the oldest generation age range was 58-94 (M = 73).

Instruments

Both the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (Bem, 1974) and the Texas Social Behavior Inventory (TSBI) (Helmreich, et al, 1974) were administered to all subjects. The volunteers were each given a packet containing three sets of questionnaires to deliver to the respondents. The directions for each set recommended that the respondents choose a quiet place to work without interruption or discussion with others.

Results

Analysis of variance yielded significant differences in means by generation on both the masculinity and femininity scales of the BSRI ($p < .05$). The middle-aged women had the highest masculinity scores (M = 97.8) followed by the young women (M = 88.7) with the old women lowest (M = 76.3) ($p < .01$). On the femininity scale the means for the two younger generations (M = 106.3, M = 108.1) were significantly higher than for the old women (M = 98.0) ($p < .01$) but did not differ significantly from each other. There were no significant differences in social competence scores by generation on the TSBI.

Analysis of the data by use of multiple regression techniques yielded a highly significant positive correlation between masculinity and social competence as expected ($r = .84$, $p < .0001$) accounting for 70 percent of the variance. There was also a non-significant but positive correlation between femininity and social competence ($r = .36$). The addition of femininity to the regression equation added little predictive power.

When the interactions of masculinity and femininity with generations were added as variables to the regression equations, only the interaction of generation and femininity scores proved to be significant ($p < .01$). When generation and interaction effects are included in the regression equation the multiple R for the correlation of femininity with social competence is R = .55 which alone, without partialling out the overlap with masculinity scores, accounts for 30 percent of the variance.

It should be noted that the lower variability of femininity scores constrains the possible correlation coefficient. The standard deviations for the femininity scores in all instances were approximately half the standard deviations of the masculinity scores. Although the femininity scores do not account for a large share of the variance across generations, the results for each generation are extremely interesting. Separate multiple regressions for each generation yielded

widely divergent correlation coefficients. For the youngest generation there was a small positive correlation of r = .16 between femininity and social competence. In the middle-aged generation this correlation was also positive and much higher, r = .74. In the oldest generation, however, the correlation between femininity and social competence was a negative one, r = -.27.

Discussion

Significant differences in levels of masculinity and femininity between generations were obtained as hypothesized. The means for both masculinity and femininity were significantly lower for the oldest generation than for the younger generations. In addition the middle-aged generation showed higher levels of masculinity than the younger and older women. The lower masculine and feminine scores in the oldest group suggests that old women may be somewhat neutral in respect to sex role characteristics. However, recent supplementary analysis of the data indicates that level of education is positively correlated with all three of our scales. Although we do not have data on the education level for one-third of our old subjects, the data we have indicates, as one would expect, that this generation has had less education than the younger members of their families. So the low masculinity and femininity scores in our old women may be an artifact or it may be a cohort specific effect. Further analysis is planned to explore the relationship of education to the three variables by generation.

The hypothesized high correlation of masculinity with social competence was supported, but no significant differences by generation in the relationship of this variable to social competence was found, contrary to expectation.

The expected differential relationship between femininity scores and social competence for generations was obtained. Some of this difference may be of course due to specific cohort effects, perhaps more likely so in the oldest generation of women. However, the widely differential relationships of femininity and social competence for different age groups of women may reflect the varying roles assigned

to women in our society at different ages. The middle-aged woman is often simultaneously mother, daughter, and wife. She is responsible for meeting the expressive needs of her family as well as being responsible for implementing the instrumental requirements of home management. She is frequently employed outside the home as well in either paid or volunteer positions, sometimes in both. In this sample she was often a college student as well. This multiplicity of roles may indeed require a high level of androgyny and a wide repertoire of both "masculine" and "feminine" behaviors to maintain appropriate levels of social competence.

Similarly, the predominantly pre-parental young women in this sample, usually either employed or students, and in some instances both, may have a lesser need for traditional feminine attributes. Perhaps young women have not yet had sufficient social experience to fully apply their feminine characteristics to related social tasks.

The negative relationship of femininity to social competence in the oldest generation is more surprising. One wonders if stereotypically feminine characteristics become non-functional as the aging woman gives up many of her expressive family roles and must to some extent fend for herself due to the declining health or death of her husband. Her view of her femininity may alter when faced with the need for greater independence and active mastery. The discontinuity between her life-long feminine stance and the loss of old roles and acquisition of new responsibilities may result in a negative relationship between feminine characteristics and the social competencies now demanded of her.

Due to the small size of our samples our results at this point are more provocative than definitive. This pilot study does, however, indicate that further investigation with larger groups and perhaps more importantly a parallel study with male subjects may further clarify the relationships between stereotypical sex role attributes, age, and the changing roles of the aging adult woman.

In summary the results of this study lend limited support to the notion that masculinity in women increases with age at least into middle age. They also provide further corroboration of studies which have found that high masculinity scores in women are associated with high social competence. The data in regard to femininity suggest that the relationship of femininity to social competence varies with the age and shifting roles of adult women.

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